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ABSTRACT

This paper points out that one of the most appropriate and needed areas in which students should engage in critical thinking is in their everyday responses to messages aimed at them in attempts to persuade and convince them to buy or believe something. Ten commonly used tactics noted in the media are described. Examples are given of slanted or distorted messages from the field of advertising. It is emphasized that critical thinking and discernment must be practiced constantly when encountering political messages that may be misleading or deceiving. (JD)

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THINKING SKILLS AND PROPAGANDA DETECTION

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Thinking Skills and Propaganda Detection

For the past three decades, educators have been encouraged to produce critical thinkers, discerning consumers, and creative problem solvers. The first of these has received renewed emphasis in the past decade, and the debate has not been whether to teach thinking skills, but rather whether to teach them as part of a regular course through an inclusion process or to teach them separately and somewhat independently.

Regardless of which of the two approaches is used, one means of enhancing any skill is to use it. Application through coached practice is especially effective in accomplishing this. The authors of this paper believe that one of the most appropriate and one of the most needed areas in which students should engage in critical thinking is in their everyday responses to the messages aimed at them in attempts to persuade and convince them to buy or believe something.

Students are exposed to hours of television, radio, and other media on any average day and are bombarded with advertisements and other less direct and more subtle efforts to sway their thinking. If they are not to be mere victims of this onslaught, they must be given the tools and skills for detecting propaganda and bias, whatever the source might be.

Students need to be able to recognize some of the most commonly used techniques in advertisements and programming which are used to influence their thinking. If they are to be discerning individuals, they must be aware that they can be swayed and that there are individuals and groups who want to convince and convert them. They need to know that their best defense is education. Specifically, this means knowledge of the methods by which the manipulation is done and skill in the application of that knowledge. They must also be cognizant of the fact that critical thinking and discernment must be practiced constantly in reference to advertisements, articles, books, movies, political campaigns, and other possible sources of slanted, distorted messages.

Teachers should explain and provide examples of at least the following ten tactics commonly noted in the media:

1. Bandwagon - This technique attempts to sell something based upon the notion that everyone is buying or believing it (e.g., everyone who is anyone is buying a Polo shirt). The message is that you should not be left out.

2. Good Ole Days - This technique attempts to sell a product or idea on the basis that the product or idea will help the buyer return to a simpler lifestyle characteristic of the good ole days (e.g., a return to the days when the family sat around the table and talked while sharing Country Time Lemonade).

3. Plain Folks - This technique attempts to sell a product by indicating that the product is good because it was designed to meet the needs of everyday people (e.g., a family pictured buying a four-door sedan that is solidly built and apparently designed just for such a typical, practical family).

4. Testimonials - This technique shows a well-known person endorsing a product with the implication that this individual knows best in this instance (e.g., Michael Landon telling everyone that Kodak products are good).

5. Heartstrings - This technique uses human emotions to sell a product. Examples include a candidate depicted as being soft on crime which causes people to fear his election and an undertaker explaining to the family that the type of casket they buy depends upon how much they loved the departed one.

6. Transfer - This technique attempts to increase the lure of something by associating it with something else that is well accepted (e.g., a candidate seated at a desk with the flag prominently displayed).

7. New and Improved - This technique implies that a product is best because being new and being improved are desirable attributes to be seriously considered when making choices (e.g., Medusa computer as state of the art).

8. Labeling - This technique attempts to influence peoples' thinking about people, places, and things through carefully chosen terms that carry strong connotations of a pejorative or praiseworthy nature (e.g., a strong family man).

9. Card Stacking - This technique attempts to mislead people by providing only untrue or half-true facts or by not providing pertinent information (e.g., a candidate reporting only his or her voting record on those areas that will be readily accepted by his constituency).

10. That's incredible - This technique attempts to sell a product by using catchy phrases and powerful modifiers (e.g., the ultimate driving machine). (Adapted from Devine, 1982)

A second area in which students need to use thinking skills in detecting propaganda is in the use of graphs as a means of presenting information. The very use of a graph connotes scientific effort and mathematical precision with the usual implication of objectivity and truthfulness. However, in the

hands of the unscrupulous, graphs may be as misleading as any other device used to send a message, but because of the increased sophistication employed, they may not be as suspect.

Because pupils are normally introduced to graphs in school where standard conventions are used and truth is preserved, they often do not regard graphs from outside sources with appropriate vigilance and discernment. Students need to be taught to think rationally, and they need to be shown how data may be managed and juggled and how graphs may deceive, even when the data being depicted may be accurate.

By manipulating the vertical and horizontal axes, violating the standard two-thirds convention wherein the data array is such that the vertical axis is about two-thirds of the length of the horizontal axis, the presenter of the information may easily mislead the unwary. By compressing the vertical axis, the graphed data may appear as less dramatic, less threatening, less achievement, or as less of a problem while expansion of the vertical axis would imply the opposites of these. The horizontal axis may be similarly contracted or expanded to deceive those unskilled in bias and propaganda detection.

Advertisers, campaign managers, and others are aware of these techniques and may be disposed to resort to them because of greed or perceived need, the latter when their existence or way of life appears threatened. Students must be aware that not everyone has their welfare and best interests as a high priority. Knowledge of appropriate and inappropriate graphing procedures is essential. Skill in detecting inappropriate and misleading or deceiving graphing tactics is again the best defense against being misled.

A third area in which students need to exercise caution and judgment is in the realm of political cartoons. These are especially effective with youth because of their level of maturation and the subtleties of the messages conveyed. When students reach the beginning of the secondary school program, the middle school or the junior high school at about the sixth or seventh grade, their sense of humor has developed to the point where political cartoons become of increasing interest to them. This often occurs before they have acquired the skills and expertise needed to discover cunning or distorted communication efforts.

Without the propaganda detecting skills necessary for analytically reading these political cartoons, the students are vulnerable to the "meaning between the lines," the deeper messages carried by the cartoons. Students must be taught that they have to be aware of what is happening in their local area, the state, the nation, and perhaps the world to really understand political cartoons. They also must become familiar with symbols commonly used to make an impression on us and affect our thinking. Finally, they need to know that when they view a political cartoon they must ask themselves questions about what they see and what they do not see, what is being presented and obvious, what is being presented that is not obvious, and what is being omitted--the other side of the story.

If students understand that publications may have bias or prejudice, that they may select cartoons to further these, and that one must exercise analytical thought and wariness at all times, then they are much better prepared to live life at a conscious level and avoid traps for the gullible. And the skills needed to read political cartoons with caution and discernment can be taught. Lohmann (1975) has given us some help in

doing this.

In summary, the acquisition and exercise of propaganda detecting skills is one more effort to teach and use thinking skills. It is also one of the most practical means of teaching some aspects of thinking because of the numerous and frequent opportunities in this area to engage in critical thinking. Additionally, it has several positive, spin-off values which include a heightened sense of reality, avoidance of hooks and snares for the unsuspecting, and increased awareness of news and other events occurring in the world.

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